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THE MEANING OF THE HEBREW

WORD דָּגַל.

THE Hebrew word דָּגַל and other derivatives from the same root have formed the subject of much discussion in modern times¹. But such discussion has always started from the conclusion or with the *assumption* that the word means "flag" or "banner," and has aimed only at explaining how this meaning was derived from the general significance of the root. A re-examination of the data afforded by the usage of the root in Biblical Hebrew and in other Semitic languages, and by the interpretations of the ancient versions, has led me to question the *certainly* of the meaning "banner" in any Old Testament passage, and to conclude that the word certainly does not bear this meaning in the account given by the priestly writer of the camp in the wilderness (Num. i, ii, x).

It will be convenient in the first place to state briefly the main relevant facts as to the root (or roots) *dgl* in other Semitic languages. On the one hand, the meanings borne by the derivatives in Arabic and Syriac can, without much difficulty, be explained as developments of some such fundamental meaning as "to cover." Thus the verb (Conj. I) has such meanings as "to smear over (with pitch)," "to tell a lie," and (Conj. II) "to overlay with gold"; *dajjāl* means "an overflowing river" and also "a liar"; *dajjālat*, "a crowd of men," "wherewith," as the *Lisān el*

¹ It may suffice to refer here to Fried. Delitzsch, *Hebrew Language in the light of Assyrian Research*, pp. 39 f.; *Prolegomena*, pp. 58 ff.; Nöldeke, *Z. D. M. G.*, 1886, pp. 728 f.; Halévy, *Revue des Études Juives*, XIV, 147.

'*Arab* adds "the earth is hidden owing to the number of the people." In Syriac, the meanings are also closely connected with "to tell a lie." Neither in Arabic nor Syriac does any derivative from the root bear any significance resembling that of "banner." If the Assyrian root *dgl* was originally identical with the Arabic and Syriac roots just considered, its meaning has undergone a very different development. In Assyrian the verb means "to look at," and hence "to wait for." The noun *diglu* occurs in the sense of "that which is looked at," "the object of sight." In the discussions already referred to, Fried. Delitzsch claimed that "in Assyrian the banner . . . is called *diglu*." In his recently published *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* he wisely modifies this statement, explaining the word as "that on which one looks . . . perhaps banner or the like." As a matter of fact, the specific sense "banner" is certainly not required in the passage cited—"Thou, O sun-god, art the *diglu* (of the inhabitants) of the wide world."

It will thus be seen that there is nothing in the usage of the root in the chief Semitic languages which at all necessitates, or even gives probability to, the assumption that דָגַל in Hebrew means "banner." If it really possessed this meaning, Assyrian gives us, what neither Arabic nor Syriac had given, a reasonable explanation of the word: the "banner" would have been so called as a "conspicuous object." Fried. Delitzsch very reasonably ridiculed such attempts to explain the word from the Arabic as the suggestion that the "banner" or "flag" was that "which covered the flag-stick."

דָגַל possibly means "banner" in one or two passages in Rabbinic Hebrew¹; and דָגַלָא in the Talmud is used of a prong, or "a carrying-pole in the shape of a standard" (Jastrow). The suggestion that this word is the Greek δίκελλα

¹ Jastrow, s. v. דָגַל II, gives as the meaning for the Hif. "to put up a flag, to signalize," but the passage cited (a reference to Cant. ii. 4) hardly requires this meaning. Dalman also gives this meaning, probably having the same passage in view.

is far from certain ; if it could be proved it would deprive the theory that דגל in the Old Testament means "banner" of such slight support as it may otherwise derive from these late uses.

But if at most but little is to be gleaned from the cognate languages, still less can be found in the ancient versions in favour of interpreting the Hebrew דגל by "banner." *Neither the Greek nor the Syriac Versions admit the meaning "banner" in any single passage, but render the noun דגל quite regularly by words meaning "troop" or "order"*¹. I venture to think that this is not merely negative but somewhat positive evidence against the view that the primary significance of the Hebrew root דגל had anything to do with a banner. These versions represent an early and consistent tradition that דגל means "a company of men," and that the verb means "to arrange (in companies)" or "select (from companies)." In cases in which a word of more or less uncertain meaning is differently interpreted in different passages by the trans-

¹ The details are as follows:—The LXX (Swete's text) always (twelve times) renders the noun דגל by τάγμα, except in Num. i. 52 and ii. 17 (BF), where the version gives ἡγεμονία, and in Cant. ii. 4, where (reading דגל for דגל) it gives a cognate verbal form—τάξτε. The Nif. part. is rendered by τεταγμένοι (Cant. vi. 4, 10), and the Kal part by ἐκλελογισμένος (=picked out of a cohort or troop, Cant. v. 10). In 1 Ki. iv. 10, xv. 4, the ταγμάτων of the LXX no doubt indicates that they read erroneously (דגל) for דגל. The later Greek versions, so far as we can judge from surviving fragments, held to the same tradition. In Num. i. 17, Aquila, Symm., and Theod. all have τάγμα : in Cant. ii. 4 Aq. has τάξτε, and Symm. a verb of similar meaning—ἐπισωρεύσατε. Symmachus's rendering of דגל by μετὰ στίφους (Cant. vi. 10), and of דגל (Ps. xx. 6) by τάγματα τάγματα διαστελοῦμεν point to the same interpretation of the root. The rendering μεγαλύνομαι (LXX xxix. 6 ; Quinta and Sexta, Cant. vi. 4, 10) perhaps implies that the translators read נגל and נגלה respectively. The Syriac in Numbers always (thirteen times) renders דגל by ܕܓܠ : in Cant. ii. 4 (reading דגל) it renders ܕܓܠ (=τάσσω) : in v. 10, vi. 3 ܕܓܠ and ܕܓܠ imply selection, or election ; the ܕܓܠ of vi. 9 is free, and the ܕܓܠ of Ps. xx. 6, like the rendering of the LXX, seems to imply the reading נגל.

lators, it is reasonable to suppose that their renderings are mere guesses; where, as in the present case, though different words are employed, the same fundamental meaning is expressed, even where the context does not suggest it (Cant. v. 10, vi. 4), their interpretation is worthy of more attention as at least representing an old and well-established tradition. This is particularly the case in the present instance, where the word in question occurs in the latest part of the Hexateuch, and yet in the earliest part of the Old Testament to be translated into Greek. The writer who employed the word דָּגַל was separated by less than two centuries from the translators who understood it to mean "company."

The other Versions are less important. The Targums (as printed in Walton's Polyglott) invariably use נִקְמָה (noun and verb) to render the various Hebrew derivatives of the root. The meaning "standard" would be suitable in the Targum of Cant. v. 10, but is scarcely necessary; and there appears to be no good ground for attributing to the word in Aramaic a meaning so remote from its Greek original (τάσσω)¹.

The Vulgate varies in its renderings. Owing to the general freedom of this version it is not always obvious which word corresponds to דָּגַל. Several times in Numbers (ii. 18, 25, 31, x. 14, 22, 25) it is quite clearly left untranslated. But the renderings "castrorum acies ordinata" of Cant. vi. 3, 9, "ordo" of Num. ii. 17, and perhaps x. 18, and "turma" of Num. ii. 24 indicate adhesion to the old tradition; whereas the "vexillum" of Num. i. 52, ii. 2, 3, 10, which is apparently intended to mean "standard" and not "a body of soldiers," already represents the prevalent modern interpretation.

The cognate languages furnish no good *prima facie* case for attributing to the Hebrew word דָּגַל the sense "banner";

¹ The meaning "standard," "banner" is not admitted in Levy's *Neuhebräisches u. chald. Wörterbuch*, nor in the Dictionaries of Jastrow and Dalman.

the earliest tradition, as preserved in the ancient versions, is absolutely opposed to such an interpretation. If, therefore, a good case is to be made out for this interpretation, it must rest mainly on the actual Hebrew usage. How far then does Hebrew usage require or admit the meaning "banner"?

The root דגל is in the Old Testament limited to two or at most three writings—the Priestly Code, the Song of Songs, and, if we allow the present Hebrew text to stand¹, in a single Psalm—xx. 6. In P, the word דגל occurs thirteen times, and always in the description of the camp in the wilderness. In some of these instances, the modern rendering "standard" and the ancient rendering "company" are equally suitable; in others, the latter meaning occasions no difficulty, but the former requires us to assume an exceedingly harsh, if not impossible, construction. I will return to the consideration of these passages after considering the passages in Canticles. If the latter series seem to establish the meaning "standard," we shall still have to consider whether דגל may not, like the Latin *vexillum*, have had as a secondary meaning "a body of men marching under one standard": and if the passages in Canticles cannot establish the meaning "standard," we shall certainly have no reason for forcing it on the account of the camp in Numbers.

The passage in Canticles which appears to be most answerable for the prevalent interpretation of דגל by "banner" is ii. 4. Of this, Fleischer² says that it establishes "banner" as the primary meaning of the Hebrew דגל. But a glance at the context and at the various explanations of the passages, offered by commentators and others, shows how far this is from being the case. There is nothing in

¹ The word דגל in Ps. xx. 6 is generally emended by modern commentators to נגל or גלל—so Nowack, Grätz, Bickell, Cheyne, and Wellhausen. Certainly some word parallel in meaning to נרכבה of line a seems to be required.

² In Levy's *Neu-heb. u. chald. Wörterbuch*, I, p. 439.

the context that requires the meaning "banner." Quite the reverse; it is not clear what the passage precisely means on the assumption that דָגַל does mean "banner." Ewald¹ explains the sentence thus—"his banner over me," wherewith he boldly defends her against every man (e. g. against her step-brothers, i. 6), 'was love'." This sense would be at least equally well obtained by giving to דָגַל the sense, "company" or "troop." Gesenius² paraphrases "I follow the standard of love which my friend carries before me, as soldiers follow a military standard without ever deserting it." Like Ewald's, Gesenius' interpretation, apart from the question of its inherent suitability, is not particularly happy in the context: the immediately preceding sentence is "He brought me to the house of wine," and the following sentence is an appeal by the loved one to her maidens to give her food. Budde³ gives an interpretation that has regard for the context; its sign (i. e. the sign of the house of wine) over me was love, i. e. the wine supplied in this house of wine was love. But pretty as this is, it is not so necessary as to establish the meaning "flag" or "sign."

A reference to "banners" is certainly not required by the figure of vi. 4, 10; "terrible as serried hosts" is at least as powerful a figure as, if a little less picturesque than, "terrible as an army with flags."

The remaining use of the root דָגַל in Canticles not only lends no support to the meaning "banner," but can only be reconciled with it in a forced and improbable manner. "The chiefest among ten thousand" no doubt represents with tolerable accuracy the general sense of v. 10^b; that it meant to a Hebrew, as R. V. version suggests, "marked out by a banner among ten thousand" is less readily to be admitted. Preferable is Fried. Delitzsch's suggestion that it means "conspicuous among ten thousand."

¹ *Dichter des Alten Bundes*², II, 376.

² *Thesaurus*, s. v. דָגַל.

³ *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum A. T.* (1898).

Just as unnecessary is the reference to banners in Ps. xx. 6 (E. V. v. 5); if the meaning "banner" be otherwise established, it may be possible to extort some sense from the word in this passage; but the context does not prepare us for it.

I do not see my way at present to offer much positive suggestion for the interpretation of the passages just considered. I have little doubt that the last is corrupt, and that the emendations of modern scholars are substantially correct. It is possible that Cant. ii. 4 is also corrupt, though the punctuation of דגל as an imperative, which is implied by the Greek and Syriac versions, and is adopted by Bruston, does not appear to me very probable. Equally unacceptable is Grätz's emendation—דגל. The fact is, the usage of the root דגל in Hebrew is too slight for us to determine what was its fundamental meaning—whether it approximated rather to the Assyrian sense "to look at," or to the Arabic and Syriac sense "to cover," or whether it had yet a different development of its own. We are, therefore, driven to make the most we can of the help afforded by the context in the several occurrences of the word. Something may yet be done for the interpretation of the passages in Canticles if they are examined freely and apart from the not too well founded prejudice in favour of the meaning "banner." But in saying this I do not wish to be understood as positively rejecting such a meaning in Cant. ii. 4; it would be unwise to disregard it altogether in view of the possible use of דגל in this sense in post-Biblical Hebrew, and in the absence of a satisfactory explanation of the root meaning of the word.

But whether דגל in Canticles means "flag" or not, it does not mean this in Numbers. There is every reason for adopting the interpretation of the ancient versions: company, division. Etymologically, it is true, we can find but very little support or parallel for this meaning; the Arabic *dajjâlat*, as we have seen, means "a great crowd of men"; but we know too little of the root in Hebrew to say that

דָגֵל="company of men" was derived from it by a similar chain of meanings to that which seems to link the meaning of the Arabic *dajjālat* with the root meaning of *dgl*. But the etymological support for the meaning "banner" is also very slight.

Ancient tradition is wholly in favour of the sense "company" and against "banner."

The context of all the passages in Numbers is fully satisfied by the meaning "company": in some of them it is irreconcilable with the sense "banner," and in others that meaning is not the most suitable.

The crucial passage is Num. ii. 3—Those that encamp eastwards towards the sun-rising shall be the *degel* of the camp of Judah according to their hosts. Now "those that encamp" are not a "banner" but a company of men. Governed by the prejudice that *degel* means "banner," we may translate the word so¹, but if we do, we are really giving to the English word, and tacitly also to the Hebrew word, the new meaning "men united under one banner." Of course, if the primary meaning of the word be "banner," that is probably the particular sense of דָגֵל as applied to a body of men, but unless we can be sure that such was the primary meaning, we shall do better to keep to a more neutral expression, such as "company."

So irreconcilable is Num. ii. 3 with the view that דָגֵל means "banner" and nothing else, that some translators and commentators give up the meaning in this particular passage². For example, R. V. renders "and those that pitch on the east side . . . shall be *they of the standard*"; but it very inconsistently lapses in vers. 10, 18, 25 to the rendering "standard." It must obviously have the same sense in at least all of these passages.

But if the meaning "banner" or "standard" is impossible

¹ So Kautzsch, Reuss—"Panier."

² Mr. Addis (*Documents of the Hexateuch*, II, p. 377) retains the meaning "standard" at the expense of an impossible construction: וְהָיוּ אֵלֶּיךָ דָגֵל וְגִ' does not mean "those that encamp . . . shall be under the standard, &c."

in some of these passages, what reason is there for adopting it in any of them? In reality, none. Indeed, some of the other passages are unfavourable to the meaning. Thus *לְהִנָּח* is not the natural construction for "to encamp beside" (Num. ii. 34)¹, nor is *נָסַע*, which is the regular word for *persons* starting on the march, quite the word we should expect of the movement of standards² (Num. x. 14, 15, 22, 25). Preferable to the translations of the R.V. (representing the almost unanimous judgment of modern scholarship) in these passages are the following:—"Thus they encamped *according to their companies*, and thus they marched" (ii. 34); "The *company* of the camp of the children of Judah set forward" (x. 14, and similarly verses 18, 22, 25).

In the remaining passages (i. 52, ii. 2, 17, 31) the meaning "banner" would yield a suitable sense; but "company" is equally suitable, and there is no reason for adopting in these passages a meaning which cannot be adopted in all the rest in preference to one that can. Thus i. 52 will run, "And the children of Israel shall encamp every man in his own camp, and every man with his own company³;" ii. 2, "The children of Israel shall encamp every man with his company, beside the ensigns of their fathers' houses." The *לְרִגְלֵיהֶם* (according to their companies) of ii. 17. 31 will be a rarer parallel expression to the frequently recurring *לְצִבְאוֹתָם*="according to their hosts."

To the meaning "banner," which, though none too certain, is the only one recognized by recent Hebrew lexicons⁴, we must add as an at least equally well-established meaning for *רִגֵּל* that of "company"; and at present it will be better to leave it an open question whether the latter

¹ Zech. ix. 8 is not really parallel.

² The use of *נָסַע* with *מִדְּבַר הַמִּשְׁכָּן* is, in view of the light in which the tabernacle was regarded, scarcely parallel.

³ The *וְהָיָה אִישׁ אֶל רִגְלוֹ* of i. 52 (cf. ii. 2) suggests that the suffix in *עָלָיו* in ii. 5, 12, 19, 27 refers to the *רִגֵּל* of vers. 7, 10, 18, 25 respectively.

⁴ Viz. Siegfried-Stade, Gesenius-Buhl, Brown-Driver-Briggs.

meaning is derived from the meaning "banner," or is independently derived from the hitherto unexplained Hebrew root דגל.

With the re-establishment of the real meaning of דגל in Numbers, a detail in the usual descriptions of the camp in the wilderness disappears. It has been generally said that the Hebrews possessed four large standards (דגל), one for each group of three tribes, and smaller flags for the various families composing the host. These large standards do not figure in the original description ; they are merely the product of a misunderstanding.

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